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**Testimony of
Leslie J. Gabel-Brett, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Select Committee on Children
Thursday, February 23, 2006**

Re:

S.B. 200, AAC Gender Specific and Trauma-Informed Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Services

S.B. 203, AA Implementing the Recommendations of the Child Poverty Council Concerning educational Activities and Eligibility Under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

H.B. 5251 AAC Recommendations of the Child Poverty Council Related to Job Training and Child Wellness

H.B. 5252 AAC Physical Education in Schools

Good afternoon Sen. Meyer, Rep. Cardin and members of the committee. My name is Leslie Gabel-Brett and I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of several bills before you that address education and training for families in poverty, gender-specific behavioral health services and physical education in schools.

S.B. 200, AAC Gender Specific and Trauma-Informed Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Services

We strongly support S.B. 200 because women and girls need services that are gender appropriate and culturally competent, and take into account their specific experiences, especially psychological trauma resulting from sexual or domestic violence. Our current systems for providing treatment to girls and women, whether through the juvenile or adult criminal justice systems, or through programs for people seeking behavioral health and substance abuse services, are not sufficiently integrated and rely too heavily on incarceration or other institutional responses when smaller, community-based services would be better. In addition, some providers are not adequately trained to recognize and treat girls and women who are victims of trauma.

S.B. 200 requires state funded programs to be more gender specific and “trauma-informed” and promotes the dissemination of “best practices” through implementation of a competitive grant program. Alyssa Benedict, an expert and trainer on this topic, explains that “gender specific systems and services are those that intentionally allow research, knowledge and competency on female development, socialization, risks, strengths, and needs to affect and guide all aspects of system design, system processes, service design and service delivery.”

A growing body of research and experience has demonstrated that girls and women need “gender-specific” services that take into account their particular experiences and developmental needs. For example, an overwhelming majority of girls and women who enter the criminal justice system have been the victims of sexual or domestic violence; in fact, the report issued by DCF pursuant to Special Act 04-05 notes that girls are three times more likely than boys to have been sexually abused by the age of 18. Girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to experience stress, depression and low self-esteem.¹ Treatment or responses that do not address the psychological consequences of trauma will not work, and may actually re-victimize the victims. In addition, research demonstrates that girls and women are more likely to thrive in settings where personal relationships are valued and nurtured, and where cultural differences are also respected.

S.B. 203, AA Implementing the Recommendations of the Child Poverty Council Concerning Educational Activities and Eligibility Under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

H.B. 5251 AAC Recommendations of the Child Poverty Council Related to Job Training and Child Wellness

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women strongly supports the work of the Child Poverty Council and the two bills before you to implement the Council’s recommendations because the majority of people living in poverty in our state our

¹ *Plan for a Continuum of Community Based Services for Adolescent Females Involved in the Juvenile Court System*, Department of Children and Families, December 30, 2004, citing various psychological research reports, p. 27

mothers and their children. If there is one message we want to deliver clearly it is that *children are poor because their parents are poor*. And their parents are often poor because they lack the education and skills to get and keep a job that leads to economic self-sufficiency.

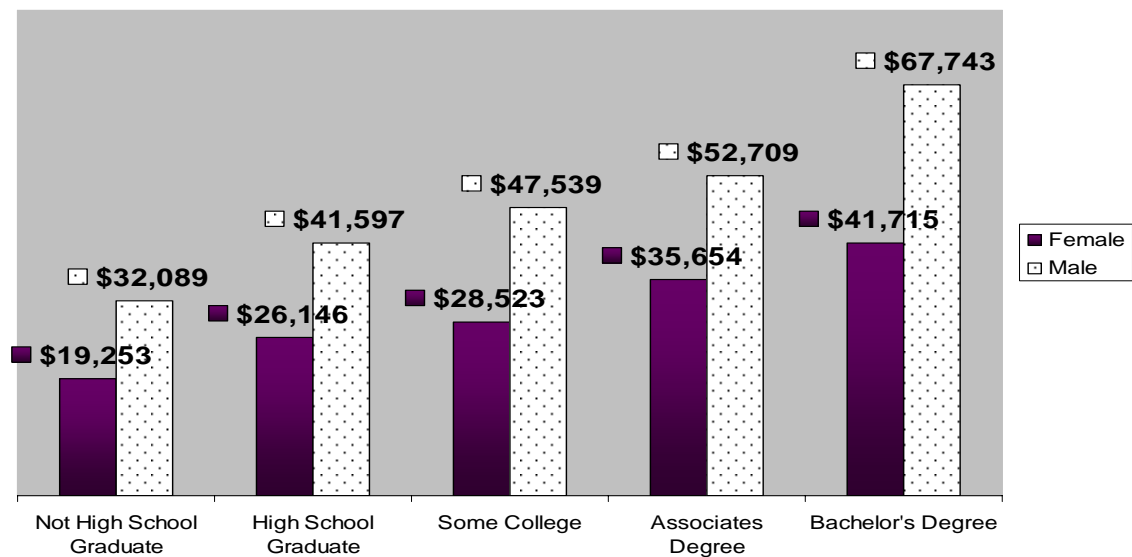
As you may know, more than one-third of the people currently receiving TANF benefits in our time-limited program do not have a high school diploma.² Yet without a high school diploma, it is nearly impossible to secure a job. If we want to unlock the door for these parents and their children, we must invest in basic adult education for them, including English as a Second Language, and skill training in occupations that lead to higher wage employment. In order for adult education to be successful, it must be provided at the right times and places for adult learners, and it should be tied to occupational opportunities.

R.B. 203 would allow more adults on the time-limited Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) program to participate in educational activities and, to the extent permitted by federal law, have such activities counted as “work participation.” The “work first” theory that disallows or discourages educational activities for welfare recipients is clearly not the best strategy for those with low literacy or no high school diploma. Therefore we strongly support the language in this proposed bill.

R.B. 5251 contains similar provisions to permit TFA recipients to participate in a pilot education program at a community-technical college in order to obtain a high school diploma, GED or alternative degree; learn English as a second language; and pursue vocational training. We support these provisions, as well. However, we also note to this committee that a similar bill to establish a pilot program for adult education for welfare recipients is pending before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee (R.B. 5024, An Act Concerning the Workforce Readiness of the Jobs First Program Participants). The proposal in that bill would appropriate \$3 million over two years for a pilot program and would not limit the providers of educational services to community-technical colleges only. In fact, there are experienced literacy and basic adult education providers that are not based at colleges, including those at public schools, whose resources should be utilized. We recommend that a pilot be established that would include a variety of education providers in addition to community-technical colleges. We would be pleased to work with members of this and other committees to integrate the strongest elements of the various bills.

The link between education and training and economic success is clear:

² CT Department of Labor, “At a Squint” data on Jobs First Employment Services, September, 2005



According to U.S. Census data for Connecticut, the difference between having a high school diploma or equivalent and not having one is worth, on average, \$7,000 per year in wages for women. Obtaining a two-year Associate's degree is worth more than \$9,000 more per year.³

We urge you to support this pilot program. Connecticut needs educated and skilled workers, and welfare recipient needs an opportunity to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

H.B. 5252 AAC Physical Education in Schools

PCSW strongly supports the passage of HB5252, which would require each school to offer students in full day kindergarten up to fifth grade a minimum of twenty minutes of physical exercise daily, in addition to physical education requirements.

Regular exercise and physical activity reduces morbidity and mortality from chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease.⁴ Obesity, like many other cardiovascular risk factors, stem from childhood to adulthood. Children today are less fit, heavier, more sedentary, and more overweight than children 20 years ago. Exercise programs that increase regular physical activity have improved fitness levels in children, and as such, are viewed as critical to reducing adult cardiovascular diseases. In fact, children who were not involved in physical education in schools reported less physical activity overall.⁵

³ U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, 2003

⁴ Harsha, D. (1995). The benefits of physical activity in childhood. *American Journal of Medical Science*, 310 (Suppl 1): S109-13.

⁵ Myers, L., Strikmiller, P., Webber, L., & Berenson, G. (1996). Physical and sedentary activity in school children grades 5-8: The Bogalusa Heart Study. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 28 (7): 852-859.

Instituting parameters for the inclusion of physical activity during school would prove to be an effective strategy for minimizing health care costs programs by reducing obesity-related diseases. In 2003, direct health costs associated with the treatment of obesity-related diseases amounted to \$75 billion nationally.⁶ In 2003, health costs associated with obesity-related illnesses amounted to \$856 million in Connecticut.⁷

As well as improving physical health in students, increasing physical activity within schools also provides critical benefits to school performance.⁸ Physical activity has a positive influence on concentration, memory, and behavior. Additionally, physical activity has been shown to benefit academic performance. Research has shown that reducing curricular time and allocating this time instead to physical activity not only does not impede academic performance, but indeed, leads to an increase in academic performance per unit of time.

Furthermore, physical activity positively impacts the mental health of students.⁹ Participation in physical activity leads to a decrease in anxiety and depression among students. Additionally, physical activity increases students' self-perception of their physical abilities, such as their sport competence, strength, endurance, or appearance.

Increasing physical activity is particularly important for the health and well-being of girls.¹⁰ Girls are significantly less active than boys and more likely to be sedentary, yet 75% of them believe they get sufficient exercise. Daily physical education in primary school has long-term, positive effects on the exercise habits in women as the likelihood of a physically active lifestyle increases significantly. If girls do not participate in a sport by the age of 10, there is less than a 10% chance that they will be participating in a sport at age 25.

Specific to girls are other additional benefits of physical activity. Engaging in physical activity one to three hours a week beginning in the teenage years may bring a 20-30% reduction in the risk of breast cancer, and four or more hours of exercise a week can reduce the risk almost 60%.¹¹ Furthermore, participation in physical activity leads to an increase in sports, which have been shown to positively impact girls' sexual behavior.¹² Girls who participate in sports have been shown to be less likely to get pregnant, be virgins, have sex later in adolescence, have sex less often, and have fewer sexual partners.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease and Control Prevention, 2004.

⁷ Finkelstein, E., Fiebelkorn, I., & Wang, G. (2004). State-level estimates of annual medical expenditures attributable to obesity. *Obesity Research*, 12: 18-24.

⁸ Strong, W., et al. (2005). Evidence based physical activity for school-age youth. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 146: 732-7.

⁹ Strong, W., et al. (2005). Evidence based physical activity for school-age youth. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 146: 732-7.

¹⁰ Women Sports Foundation (2006).

¹¹ Bernstein, L., Henderson, B., Hanisch, R., Sullivan-Halley, J., & Ross, R. (1994). Physical exercise and reduced risk of breast cancer in young women. *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, 86: 1403-1408.

¹² Dodge, T., & Jaccard, J. (2002). Participation in athletics and female sexual risk behavior: The evaluation of four causal structures. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 17:42-67.

Increasing physical activity in students has a significant impact on the health and well-being of our youth, and on the health care dollars of our state. Providing nutritious breakfasts for our youth is critical to their health and education. The impact of these health provisions is long-standing and critical. These proposals are an important step in the right direction. We urge your support.